



# Real and fantastic Bucharest limits in Mircea Cartarescu's writings

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## Real and fantastic Bucharest limits in Mircea Cartarescu's writings

« In Bucuresti ma simt, intr-adevar, mai legitim decat in alte parti. Desi e un oras ultraurat si, pe deasupra, criminal de neglijat de edili. In cincisprezece ani nu s-a putut renova nici macar bruma de centru istoric care ne-a mai ramas. Cat despre oroarea blocurilor muncitoresti, nu vom scapa de ele cate zile vom avea. Aici nu mai e nimic de facut. Bucurestiul din scrierile mele e un oras in intregime fictiv, amalgam de vise adevarate si de false amintiri. De peste zece ani reconstruiesc cu migala, din asemenea fragmente de origine incontrollabila si dubioasa, un oras identificabil cu o carte si cu un creier: Bucurestiul, „Orbitor”, al meu. »<sup>1</sup>

[In Bucharest I feel, that's true, more real than anywhere else. Even if it is a city extremely ugly and, overall, criminally not looked after by its councilors. In fifteen years there was no renovation of the few rests of the historic part of the city that still stands. And we'll never get rid of the horrible dormitories areas – the communist blocks. Nothing can be done there. The Bucharest of my writings is a total imaginary one, a mixture of true dreams and fake memories. For over ten years I've patiently reconstructed, from such fragments with strange and unverifiable origin, a city identifiable with a book and a brain: my “Blinding” Bucharest.]

Being from a provincial town where time seems to be still and every figure you meet on the streets looks familiar, I've always wanted to discover the Capital. And like every little Romanian going to school, I've learnt that Bucharest had nothing to envy from no matter capital of the world. The communist system imposed a cephalic governance of the country. Thus every decision was taken in the capital, the cultural life happened in Bucharest and Bucharest gave to the country everything needed. Bucharest was modern – Ceausescu introduced the metro, destroyed the “old and infected buildings” and gave to the Romanians the “most wonderful” present one could think of: People's House –; Bucharest had history – wasn't it called “little Paris” by the rich and famous of the world in between the wars? –; Bucharest was the Holy

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Cartarescu, interview taken by Dia RADU in FORMULA AS nr. 655, 21 – 28 February 2005, [http://www.formula-as.ro/reviste\\_655\\_177\\_mircea-cartarescu.html](http://www.formula-as.ro/reviste_655_177_mircea-cartarescu.html) [05/06/2007]

land of every Romanian – when the rest of the country failed into darkness, famine and cold, in the capital you could hope to find what you needed (not without fight, of course).

After the events of 1989, there was a sudden crisis, but Bucharest rested the Capital. The young people of the 1990's rushed to it to find a job (until then, one could live in Bucharest only if the police gave him/her the Bucharest identity card) and all the teenagers waited impatiently to finish high school, have their diploma and go to University in Bucharest.

Bucharest also had authors that loved it as if it was their mistress. And the most in loved writer with Bucharest was Mircea Cartarescu. His Bucharest is full of magic and surprise. The name of the streets sounds familiar, but the way he describes it is so wonderful, so miraculously new, that one can't get it out of his/her mind. Cartarescu's entire work – poetry, prose, articles – turns around one central theme: the city where the author:

« mi-am plimbat isteria si singuratatea »<sup>2</sup>  
[walked [his] loneliness and hysteria]

No, the Bucharest of Cartarescu is not a succession of blocks one could find in the real Romania. His first books were written and published in the 1980's, but they were hypnotic. Until 1990, everywhere you looked, you could see the life in shades of gray. The houses, actually blocks of flats, were gray, the clothes people wore were gray, the two hours of TV program were also gray (for the color TV appeared only after 1990), the rivers were gray and the faces of peoples were so sad, that gave the impression of gray. Yet, the books of Cartarescu gave the image of a colorful, full of light Bucharest, magnificent in his splendor.

His poems (he debuted as a poet in an anthology of poetry of the writers of his generation, *Desant '83*) spoke of love, but they all had glimpses of Bucharest:

« Niste grasane se uitau la mine/si atunci imi dau seama ca zambesc./zambesc  
in masina 109 in drum spre slujba./fireste impresie buna nu poate sa faca/un

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<sup>2</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « La aniversara » [At the anniversary], in *Pururi tânăr, înfasurat în pixeli* [Forever young, wrapped in pixels], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 120.

tinerele plute care se uita pe geam si zambeste./dar eu mi-am amintit de tine si  
am zambit./[...] in masina putea maieuri si-a benzina/iar pe geam ce sa vezi ?  
blocuri si iar blocuri. »<sup>3</sup>

[Some fat women were looking at me/and then I realized I'm  
smiling./I'm smiling in the car 109 in my way to work./of course, a  
long haired youngster/that looks on the window and smiles/can't  
give a good impression./but I've remembered you and, as usual, I  
smiled./[...] the car stinks of sweat and gas/and what can you see at  
the window? blocks after blocks.]

All his poems need to praise his two loves: the girl and Bucharest. What better  
compliment could a girl dream for:

« cum îti picura parul pe sale/ca un camion fructexport, fantomatic si moale/care  
ar trece pe dorobanti. »<sup>4</sup>

[how your hair drops on your back/like a truck exporting fruits,  
ghostly and soft/passing on dorobanti street.]?

When the poet falls in love, Bucharest becomes a poem in itself, a place created to  
enlarge the beauty of the loved one:

« Ninge peste Colentina si erau stelute in genele ei./Tramvaiul patru cotea  
inzapezit la Sf. Dumitru/Si erau stelute, stelute, stelute in genele ei. /[...] Aerul era  
rece, tramvaiele reci,/maxi-taxiurile abia infiintate /mergeau toate pe patru roate/si  
erau stelute in genele ei. »<sup>5</sup>

[It was snowing over Colentina and there were sparks on her  
eyelashes./The snowbound tram number four was turning at Saint  
Dumitru/And there were sparks on her eyelashes./[...] The air was  
cold, the trams were cold,/the recent created maxi-taxis /were going  
on their four wheels/and there were sparks on her eyelashes.]

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<sup>3</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Zambesc » [I'm smiling], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Posedai tot felul de obiecte electrice » [You had all sorts of electrical objects], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Stelute in genele ei » [Sparks on her eyelashes], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

The girl the poet loves is able to color and light the streets of the city, in a period when illuminating the towns and the villages by night was clearly an anti-patriotic action:

“și apoi treceam dizolvând în culoarea de televizor în culori a umbrelei /magazinele cu frapé-uri, furouri și doftorii din pasaj/cei o sută cinci zeci și patru de centimetri ai tăi/măturau asfaltul în fața noastră/și spintecau cu lanternele întunericul bulevardului/în dreptul teatrului foarte mic/și îți cărau în memorie alte glasuri, alte încăperi...”<sup>6</sup>

[and afterwards we passed dissolving in the color of the color TV of the umbrella/the stores with frapés, sheet dresses and the doctors from pasaj/your one hundred fifty four centimeters /were sweeping the asphalt in front of us/and cut with the torches the darkness of the boulevard /in front of the very small theatre/and were carrying in the memory other voices, other rooms...]

Her eyes, resembling to zeppelins, are floating over the market-places, under the astonished people, making the poet fill for the first time that he exists:

« Zepeline lungi planau peste piata Bucur-Obor/erau ochii tai lungi, vazuti prin retrovizor./Cine mai vazuse glisand uriase, atata de-aproape/zepeline cu gene, cu cearcane, cu fard albastrui peste pleoape?/Cetatenii priveau prin ferestrele farmaciei, patiseriei, C.E.C.-ului,/magazinului de confectii pentru barbati, femei&copii/indicatoarele de circulatie se muiasera de placere/tigancile cu guma de mestecatcu poze de Alfa-Romeo/isi sucisera vertebrele cervicale in sus/iar ochii tai intrau in nori, sclipeau in soare, indepartandu-se mereu/spre apus... »<sup>7</sup>

[Long zeppelins were floating over the Bucur-Obor market place/there were your long eyes, seen in the driving-mirror./Who had seen gigantically sliding, so close, /zeppelins with eyelashes, with dark rings, with blue eye shadow over the eyelids?/The citizens were looking through the windows of the drugstore, of the pastry shop, of the bank,/of the shop with confection for men, women & children/the streets signs were melting with pleasure/the gipsy women selling chewing-gums with surprise pictures of Alfa-Romeo cars/twisted their

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<sup>6</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Adio! La Bucuresti » [Good bye! In Bucharest], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Zepeline peste piata Bucur-Obor » [Zeppelins over Bucur-Obor market-place], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

cervical vertebrae/and your eyes were entering into the clouds, were  
shining into the sun, moving away/to the sunset... ]

The love feeling makes the poet believe in the reality of the city that surrounds him:

« credeam, pe cuvânt, credeam prima dată în viața /mea în realitatea absolută a  
mașinilor și tramvaielor și bordurilor/credeam și în nori, mi se părea că am o istorie,  
că am un trecut, că/am scris cărți/credeam în bicicletele medicinale din vitrină, în  
mingile de tenis din/cuțile „Airplane”, în fulgii de badminton din cuțile „Double  
Happiness”, în fiecare bucată de tergal de pe manechinele cu teasta goală  
și ochelari de soare/in fiecare mandarină din toneta de mandarine »<sup>8</sup>

[I believed, truly, for the first time in my/life I believed in the absolute  
reality of the cars and the trams and the borders/I believed in the  
clouds, it seems I had a history, I had a past, I/wrote books/I believed  
in the medicinal bikes of the shop-windows, in the tennis balls of/the  
“Airplane” boxes, in the badminton flies of the “Double Happiness”  
boxes,/in every cloth of the bold dummies/with sun glasses/in every  
tangerine from the tangerines shop]

The places named are all existing – the Colentina district, the Very Small Theater, The  
Saint Dumitru Church, the Dorobanti Street, the car no. 109. The windows of the  
shops had the same image as the one given by his poems: each and every one of  
them was specialized in one type of activity, with little choice of products. Yet the  
atmosphere is fantastic, Bucharest seems to be recreated as if the poet is the director  
of a surrealist movie in which the script is written by his love. The passing point of this  
border between the real and the magic city is clearly showed in [Zeppelins over Bucur-  
Obor market-place] poem:

« filmam existența, lumea se strânse în jurul meu să vadă cum filmez/ existența,  
cum mă ocup de ecleraj, cum potrivesc/reflectorarele, cum fac pe inginerul de  
sunet, cum fac/o probă de microfon reglând înălțimea girafelor, cum/glisez pe  
caruciorul pe sine, plonjând în travelinguri/fără sfârșit/si un țaran făcea cu mâna  
spre obiectiv ca să se vadă în poemul meu »<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Zepeline peste piața Bucur-Obor » [Zeppelins over Bucur-Obor market-place], in  
*Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Zepeline peste piața Bucur-Obor » [Zeppelins over Bucur-Obor market-place], in  
*Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

[I was filming the existence, people were gathering around me to see how I film/the existence, how I take care of the lights, how I range/the reflectors, how I play the sound technician, how/I test the micro by fixing the height of the arm, how/I slide on the little train, submerging in traveling/without end /and a peasant was giving a hand sign to the camera to be seen in my poem]

The universe is the creation of a writer, a movie-director or a painter, for the work of art is the only Truth accepted. The God is nobody else but the Creator.

When love comes to an end, Bucharest changes in an ugly place, gray as its blocks:

« Ea este o fata de peste blocuri si mari/acum e maritata, grvida, n-are nici o importanta./Amorul nostru nemuritor s-a dus dracului/Acum nu mai sunt stelutele in genele ei. »<sup>10</sup>

[She is a girl from over blocks and seas/now she's married, pregnant, has no importance./Our eternal love went to hell./Now there are no sparks in her eyelashes.]

« la revedere, dragoste, în toamna aceasta!/de-acum amorul nostru /sparge asfaltul pentru lucrările de canalizare/ca să ne asigure o existență decentă. /vreau să-ți mai spun/că aseară s-a prăbușit de singurătate/romarta copiilor. »<sup>11</sup>

[good bye, love, in this autumn !/from now on our love breaks the asphalt to repair the plumbing system/for us to have a decent existence. /I only want to tell you/that the children's romarta store/crushed last night because of the loneliness.]

In the 1980's, the life, even in Bucharest, was difficult, especially for the young, rebel poet. Living in an anachronistic world, were as a man you were not allowed to wear long hair, were it was completely forbidden to wear blue-jeans, or to have no job, or to listen to rock music (the rebels of the period, young men with ideas and ideals, trespassed those rules), the only consolation possible was the long walk in the city. But the beautiful "little Paris" changed every day. The XIX<sup>th</sup> century architecture, the

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<sup>10</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Stelute in genele ei » [Sparks on her eyelashes], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Adio! La Bucuresti » [Good bye! In Bucharest], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

ancient churches were demolished in order to make place for the blocks. In an ironic poem titled “Thank you for the music”, the poet describes one usual day he had as a young teacher in Bucharest:

« Strainule, esti in pericol sa ma pierzi./si asta numai pentru ca nu pot sa numar  
pana la/o suta de bilioane./pentru ca nu pot sa-ti numar ochii/si nu ma intereseaza  
cati plamani si cate inimi ai sub camasa/si cate degete ai in soseta si cate sosete/ai  
in baschetii jerpeliti./nici macar in dimineata asta inzapezita/cand a trebuit sa cobor  
pana la Administratie ca sa platesc lumina/si apoi sa merg la PTTR-ul de/vizavi de  
magazinul Tineretului/si liceul Caragiale ca sa platesc/telefonul si apoi sa cumpar  
Viata/studenteasca (fiind miercuri) si la/mezelaria din colt cu cinematograful/Volga  
ca sa iau smantana si inapoi/cu tramvaiul 24/nu ai sa ma convingi ca universul  
nostru/este un spalator cu oglinzile jupuite. »<sup>12</sup>

[Stanger, you risk the danger of losing me/and that only because I  
can't count to/one hundred billions./because I can't count your  
eyes/and I'm not interested how many lungs and how many heats  
you have under your shirt/and how many toes you have in your socks  
and how many socks/you have in your destroyed converses./not  
event in this snowed up morning/when I had to get down to the  
Administration to pay my electricity/and then to go to the post  
office/facing the Tineretului store/and the Caragiale high school to  
pay/the phone and then to buy the Life/of the Students (for it was  
Wednesday) and to/the shop at the corner with the cinema/Volga to  
buy cream and back/with the tram no. 24/you will not convince me  
that our universe/is a laundry with flay mirrors.]

No matter what beautiful place or free life the stranger will lure the poet with, he will never agree that his dear Bucharest is not worthy to live in. The poet thanks for the music, for lady Bump, for Mister Tambourine man, for little Lucy, for Michelle (his belle for whom he's working like a dog), for Jesus-Christ super-star – they all filled up his teenage period with sounds and colors. But his Bucharest has something unique:

« in fata blocului meu, dincolo de Soseaua Stefan cel Mare,/au demolat vreo patru  
maghernite/si acum e un teren viran, gol de parca strazii ii lipseste un/premolar.  
cate o dementa isi mai plimba cainele p-acolo./acolo a coborat. pur si simplu s-a

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<sup>12</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Multumesc pentru muzica » [Thank you for the music], in *Poeme de amor* [Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.



dat jos/din cabina cu trandafiri de plastic si poze din revista Femeia/a basculantei divine./divina pentru ca exista./acolo, intre balti si mormane de var si vreo trei pomi/s-a dat jos Zapada, Inteligenta./nu sunt in stare sa numar pana la o suta de bilioane/dar i-am ascultat colosala zvacnire de inima/pana terenul viran a devenit o panza de Desiderio/iar eu numai o pata de Duco pe caroseria/Fiatului parcat langa noi./iar tu doar o dama care vedeai fara sa fii in stare sa crezi,/ceea ce se-ntamplase fara sa se-ntample:/porumbelul de fier zburand telecomandat intre temple./Strainule, esti in pericol sa ma pierzi/pentru trufia/de a nu fi in stare sa mai existi. »<sup>13</sup>

[in front of my block, on the other side of the Stefan cel Mare roadway,/they demolished some four old houses/and now it's a waste ground, empty as if the street would miss a/premolar. some nuts lady walks her dog there./there it got down. it just got down/from the monitor room full of plastic roses and photos taken from the Women's magazine/of the holy weighing machine./holy for it existed./there, between paddles and mountains of lime and some three trees/got down the Snow, the Intelligence./I can't count to one hundred billions/but I've listened its giant heart movement/until the waste land became a Desiderio picture/and I became only a Duco stain on the body/of the Fiat parked near us./and you only a madam which saw but could not believe it, what had happened without happening:/the iron pigeon directed to fly in between the temples./Stranger, you risk the danger of losing me/for the pride/of not being able to exist.]

As one of his characters from the *REM* short-story, Svetlana says, « Plus le lieu de l'action, du jeu ou de la pensée est étroit, plus le reste du monde, c'est-à-dire le Monde, s'élargit. Par conséquent, mieux vaut restreindre son espace vital, quitte à atteindre l'inexistence, pour avoir une chance d'augmenter ce qui le monde possède de merveilleux. »<sup>14</sup> [More the place of the action, of the game or of the thought is limited, more the rest of the world, the World, widens. Consequently, it's better to limit one's own vital space, even if one touches the non-existence, in order to have a chance of increasing the wonders of the world.] As a girl

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<sup>13</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « Multumesc pentru muzica » [Thank you for the music], in *Poeme de amor*[Love Poems], Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, "REM", in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992.

Svatlana had the chance to find the REM. It happened in the remote suburb of Dudesti, where her aunt lived. She and her parents lived near Obor market, in the center of the capital. To arrive at her aunt, she had to make an extraordinary voyage, passing through the Obor balkanic market:

« Débouchant de l'avenue Etienne-le-Grand, on se trouvait aussitôt environné d'une multitude d'usines de toutes les formes, de toutes les dimensions, de toute les couleurs. Elles étaient coiffées de panneaux de verre où d'étaient des lettres peintes à la main, joliment calligraphiées dans une grande variété de caractères d'imprimerie. Fabricants de Poêles, matelassiers, tailleurs, « vitres et miroirs », horlogers, « pompes funèbres » (il y avait là, en permanence, un cercueil debout contre la porte, un cercueil doublé d'un coffrage de satin), une clé de bois géante pendue perpendiculairement au mur et portant le mot YALE, une pendule de verre grande comme l'horloge de la gare avec ses aiguilles arborant le nom du propriétaire. A gauche se trouvait une gargote d'où sortait une éternelle fumée bleue à odeur de mititei. Autour, on voyait grouiller une foule d'ivrognes, de Tsiganes vêtus à la hongroise, de femmes aux larges jupes ondoyant autour du corps, de paysans transportant des tresses d'ail et des sacs à demi remplis qui fleuraient encore le chanvre. »<sup>15</sup>

[Coming out from Stfetan-cel-Mare avenue, we immediately found ourselves surrounded by a multitude of factories of all shapes, dimensions and colors. They were headdressed with glass billboards on which there were hand painted letters, beautifully calligraphies of all sorts of letters. Frying-pans manufacturers, mattresses makers, tailors, "glasses and mirrors", clock-makers, "undertaker's" (permanently, there it was a coffin standing near the door, a coffin with a satin coffering), a giant wood key pended perpendicularly to the wall with the word YALE on it, a glass clock big as the train station clock with its hands showing the name of the owner of the shop. On the left there was a cheap restaurant from where an eternal blue traditional sausages smoke got out. Around, one could see milling about a crowd of drunkards, Hungarian dressed-like gypsies, women with large skirts waving around their hips, peasants carrying garlic tresses, and half-filled bags that still smelled the hemp.]

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<sup>15</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, « REM », in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Climatis, 1992, p. 201

The Oriental market illustrates the space of in-between frontiers that Romania is: half-western, half-eastern, the country always tried to line-up to one dominant mentality. Under the Ottoman influence, the Slavic countries that surrounded it and the desire of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century educated classes to resemble to France and Germany:

“A rezultat o lume anistorica, multietnica, un spatiu al oralitatii si al fantasmelor, de o saracie pitoreasca si in acelasi timp de o opulenta de basm oriental, mai cu seama insa o lume a tolerantei fara sfarsit.”<sup>16</sup>

[Resulted an an-historic multi-ethnic world, a space of oral transmission and fantasies, of a picturesque poverty and in the same time of an oriental fairy-tale opulence, but none-of-the-less, a world of unending tolerance.]

It is the melting pot of a world in which the limits between good and evil, generosity and corruption, wisdom and tyranny disappear and :

“imagarul este firul din care se tese realitatea”<sup>17</sup>

[the fiction is the thread from which the reality is created].

This is why the Bucharest of Cartarescu gains in colors, illusions and weird. But the most astonishing facts can't happen in the eyes of everybody. The fantasy chooses its audience and also its scene. For as the orthodox tradition says that a Church can be built only in a holy places the Creator marked the earth with, the fantasy can be approached only in the places that the Creator of the Book designs as fantasy marked ones.

In his first short-stories collection, *The Dream*, translated in France in 1992 and nominated at Médicis Prize, Mircea Cartarescu identifies for the first time his recurrent themes that will follow all his creation from then on.

The place of the action of all the short-stories is Bucharest, where the author:

“am trait intreaga mea viata in conditii de ghetou. M-am nascut intr-o camaruta cu ciment pe jos, in care se dormea, se gatea si se facea baie, caci era singura pe care o aveam. Am mers la dispensare nesfarsit de triste, cu mulaje ciobite si patate de muste, infatisand sectiuni printr-o femeie gravida, asezate pe etajere de sticla.

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<sup>16</sup> Mircea CARTRAESCU, « Medicul si vrajitorul » [The doctor and the sorcerer], in *Pururi tânăr, înfășurat în pixeli* [Forever young, wrapped in pixels], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 224.

<sup>17</sup> Mircea CARTRAESCU, « Medicul si vrajitorul » [The doctor and the sorcerer], in *Pururi tânăr, înfășurat în pixeli* [Forever young, wrapped in pixels], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 224.

Am invatat la o scoala tip, in forma de U, ca toate celelalte, cu plase de sarma la geamuri. Pe gardul ei de beton erau scrise cu vopsea lozinci de fotbal si cuvinte obscene. [...] Pierdeam dupa-amieze intregi pe treptele din spatele blocurilor, in damful acru al lazilor de gunoi.”<sup>18</sup>

[lived my entire life like in a ghetto. I was born in a small room with cement on the floor, where we slept, cooked and washed, for it was the only one we had. I went to awfully sad public dispensaries, with broken and filthy moulds of sectioned pregnant women lined on glass shelves. I learnt in a typical U form school, like all the others, with iron net on the windows. On the concrete fence there were painted football slogans and obscene words. [...] I used to waste days after days on the steps behind the blocks, in the sour smell of the trash cans.]

The ugly image of the city that surrounded the childhood of Cartarescu, was the same for all the Romanians that lived in that era when: “la televizor vorbea Ceausescu, la radio tot Ceausescu, pana si la fierul de calcat si la masina de cusut vorbea Ceausescu.”<sup>19</sup>[at the TV, Ceausescu spoke, at the radio, Ceausescu spoke, even at the iron and at the sewing machine he spoke.] But Cartarescu found out soon that there was a way in which even the pale inhabitants of the concrete labyrinth<sup>20</sup> could live free. For him, that freedom was called fantasy and he arrived to erase the frontiers of the reality in his short-stories.

Svetlana, the character mentioned before that I’ve left in the Obor market place on the way to her aunt, takes the tram with her mother. The tram is a new source of astonishment:

“Les tramways étaient en bois, avec de nombreuses rames non couvertes, ils avaient de petites fenêtres et un seul phare devant, au-dessus du grillage du métal. En même temps que les portes qui grinçaient en se pliant – elle étaient grossièrement

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<sup>18</sup> Mircea CARTRAESCU, « Ghetou » [Ghetto], in *Pururi tânăr, infasurat in pixeli* [Forever young, wrapped in pixels], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 243.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea CARTRAESCU, « Ghetou » [Ghetto], in *Pururi tânăr, infasurat in pixeli* [Forever young, wrapped in pixels], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 243.

<sup>20</sup>As Mircea CARTRAESCU states it in « Ghetou » [Ghetto], in *Pururi tânăr, infasurat in pixeli* [Forever young, wrapped in pixels], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 243.

graissées d'une matière noire qui venait régulièrement salir mes habits – on voyait de rétracter l'escalier permettant l'accès au train.[...] Sur un panneau, on avait grave quelque chose en allemand. Les sièges des wagons étaient faits de lattes de bois jaune et brillant et des poignées ovales destinées aux mains de ceux qui étaient parvenus à sa faufiler jusque-là, pendaient du plafond.”<sup>21</sup>

[The tramways were in wood, with numerous wagons not covered, they had small windows and only one headlight in front of it, over the metal grill. In the same time the doors were grinding when opening – they were roughly greased with a black substance that regularly dirtied my clothes – one could see the stairs retracting and allowing the entrance on the tram. [...] the seats were in yellow wooden laths and oval handles pended from the ceiling for those who arrived there.]

The tramway is the hyphen between the known world, the one Svetlana lives in the ordinary Bucharest, and the new, the strange one, at the remote area of the city, where her aunt lives, where she experiences fantasy and discovers the REM. To arrive to her aunt's house, Svetlana has to change two trams, turn some unknown little streets, pass near yellow schools and small old houses and finally arrive on a street that:

“ était longue et droite, avec des barrières de bois et des façades basses de part et d'autre. [...] Il nous fallait parcourir toute la longueur de la rue pour atteindre la demeure de brique non crépie que nous connaissions si bien, l'avant-dernière de la rue et même – si l'on veut dire les choses comme elles sont – l'avant-dernière maison de la ville. Au-delà de la toute dernière, recroquevillée au fond d'un jardin, s'étendait la plaine remplie de mauvaises herbes qui sépare la ville de la commune de Doudesht. De la plaine, de la plaine, aussi loin que les yeux peuvent porter ! Comme il me semblait étrange qu'une rue s'achève ainsi, dans le vide, plutôt que déboucher sur d'autres rues...”<sup>22</sup>

[was long and right, with wood gates, and low fronts on one part and the other. [...] We had to traverse all the street to reach the well-known roughcast brick dwelling, the next to last one of the street – and, to be totally honest – the next to last one of the city. Beyond the last one,

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<sup>21</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, “REM”, in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, “REM”, in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, p. 206.

curled up behind a garden, it spreaded the plane, full of weeds, that separated the city from the Dudeshti village. Plaine, plaine as one could see! How it seemed strange that a street ends like this, in the empty space, rather than in another street...]

The physical limit of Bucharest is the place where reality ends and where fantasy is real. Playing with her friends (they were seven in total), during seven days, in seven places of that street, Svetlana enters the limits separating her childhood from her teenage period. The frontiers are of several degrees and the children's games reveal to similar Creations to the Writer ones.

In the first day, in the plaine where the street ended, the girls discover, by digging, a secret passage that hid the skeleton of a giant:

“Nous avons élargi la fosse jusqu’au moment où nous avons pu en sortir la planche et nous avons découvert un tunnel à plusieurs étages dont les marches descendaient dans les profondeurs de la terre. [...] Après avoir tourné plusieurs angles dans le corridor, nous sommes arrivées dans une salle gigantesque. [...] Dans l’ultramarin qui baignait la salle sur toute sa longueur, un squelette humain géant gisait face à nous, étendu sur le dos montrant nettement côtes et bassin.”<sup>23</sup>

[We enlarged the hole until we could take out the board and we discovered a tunnel with several levels with stairs going down in the depth. [...] After turning several corners in the tunnel, we arrived in a gigantic room. [...] In the bluish air that floated in the room, a giant human skeleton was lying in front of us, on his back, showing ribs and basin.]

In the yard of Svetlana's aunt, the girls drew seven lines, each one of them standing for ten years. Each girl had to pass over each line and mime the age represented there:

“La grosse, [...] traversait la ligne indiquant l’âge de dix ans (elle en avait déjà onze) et la traversait à petit pas lents effectués le long de l’allée. [...] Elle se trouvait au niveau de la ligne trois et je crus au débout qu’elle mimait l’âge mûr avec une véracité troublante. Mais ce ne pouvait être seulement du mime : Baleine

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<sup>23</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, “REM”, in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, p. 240.

était en train de s'allonger, ses hanches et ses seins s'étaient alourdis, sa chevelure avait changé de couleur. [...]”<sup>24</sup>

[The fat one [...] passed the line showing the age of ten years old (she had eleven) and she passed slowly the long of the alley. [...] She was now at the third line and I first thought she mimed the mature age with a troubling veracity. But she couldn't just mime it: Whale was lengthening, her hips and her breasts got heavier, her hair changed colour. [...]]

One day after the other, they walked on the street and found themselves in a strange deserted city, where they created the Creator; in the garden of Svetlana's aunt, they formed strange eggs that transformed in unicorns, giant caterpillars, odd Siamese transparent birds, a red crab and others peculiar fantasies; from the room of one of them, they travel into the space and saw the Creator they created as well as the seven biggest sins – and they understood that Good and Evil are the faces of the same coin and that the boundaries between them aren't stable.

At the end, Gina finds the REM – the dream that is the Creation of the world. She dreams she enters in a room where a young man is typing a story that she starts reading. She realizes she's reading her own story. The world is a fiction, a creation of an Author that allows one of his characters to discover him. Thus the borders between real and imagined world are broken.

The only frontiers that Svetlana and her friends didn't transgress, are those between man and woman. Platon's androgyne is recreated by a couple of teenagers, Andrei and Gina, in another short-story of the same volume: “Gemenii” [The Twins].

Andrei and Gina are classmates and everything about them is different: while Andrei is a tall, quiet intellectual, Gina is a little exuberant frivolous girl. Almost stereotyped ideas of male and female, they inevitably fall in love.

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<sup>24</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, “REM”, in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, pp. 248 – 249.

When one night, in Gina's room, Andrei wants to make love for the first time with her, the girl shows him her biggest secret. Her room had a secret passage joining Grigore Antipa Natural Science Museum of Bucharest. That passage was tortuous, full of filth and passed under the city. Once arrived in the museum, the two teenagers start visiting it, from the mineral and fossils rooms, to cambrian, Silurian, devonian age and so on, to quaternary age with its mammoths, to bronze age until the nowadays era. They admired insects, fishes, mammals, birds. They made fun of them, destroyed one or two and arrived in the last room, the one with genetic mutilated squirts preserved in formal glasses. There, in the last room of the museum, there is a small door that opened in:

“une chambre de la taille d'une mansarde, un « placard » pareil à celui dans lequel vivait Raskolnikov, avec des affiches à demi arrachées sur les murs, avec un vieux sofa occupant la moitié de l'espace, avec un petit rayonnage rempli de livres sur lesquels se trouvaient entassées aussi des paperasses : je me rappelle quelques titres, « Le livre noir des morts tibétains », « Les filles du feu » de Nerval, un roman de Dostoïevski et un album de William Blake, avec des planches. L'une de ces planches avait été arrachée de l'album et fixée avec des punaises sur la porte de bois. Elle représentait une femme vue de dos et penchée sur une fontaine. Au-dessus de cette femme brillait un soleil noir géant.”<sup>25</sup>

[a room big as an attic, a closet alike the one Raskolnikov lived in, with posters tore out of the walls, with an old sofa occupying half of the space, with a small bookshelf filled with books and papers: I remember some titles, “The Tibetan Black Book of Deaths”, “The Fire Girls” by Nerval, a novel by Dostoevski and an album by William Blake, with pictures. One picture had been torn up from the album and fixed with pins on the wood door. It represented the back on a woman leaning on a fountain. Over the woman shined a giant black sun.]

The little room seems to be the subconscious of Gina, for there she refugiated every time she wanted to be happy, there she kept all her precious memories. And there, after they made love, Andrei and Gina changed their bodies:

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<sup>25</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, “Gemenii” [The Twins], in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, pp. 165 – 166.



“Je me suis réveillé transformé en Gina. [...] J’étais allongé sur le dos et je me regardais dans les pupilles de la créature diffuse couchée sur moi : j’y voyais le visage de Gina, légèrement déformé par la sphéricité de l’œil. Quand le cône de ma conscience s’est élargi, je me suis rendu compte que cette femme avait mes traits et qu’elle me regardait avec une terreur sans fin. J’ai regardé mon corps, qui était le corps de la femme que j’aimais ; j’avais ses bras, ses seins, sa chevelure, ses hanches, ses jambes. J’avais sa peau et ses os et je gardais sur les lèvres le goût d’éther de son rouge à lèvres. [...] Et elle c’était moi, un corps d’homme long et sec, une poitrine décharnée, des hanches étroites, un sexe pareil à un ver entre deux cuisses velues et surtout, surtout, mon visage, mes yeux, mes logues mâchoires, ma moustache au-dessus de ma bouche sensuelle et douloureuse.”<sup>26</sup>

[I woke up changed into Gina. [...] I was laying on my back and I was watching myself in the pupils of the diffuse creature on top of me: I saw the face of Gina, slightly deformed by the sphericity of the eye. When the cone of my conscience widened, I realized that woman had my features and she looked at me with an endless terror. I looked at my body, that was the body of the woman I loved; I had her arms, her breasts, her hair, her hips, her legs. I had her skin and her bones and I kept on the lips the taste of ether of her lipstick. [...] She was me, a body of a long and skinny man, a bony chest, narrowed hips, a sex alike a worm in between two hairy thighs and above all, above all, my face, my eyes, my long jaws, my mustache over my sensual and painful mouth.]

The androgyne is not recreated, and the blasphemy of the error brings back to life all the stuffed creatures of the Museum. The apocalyptic scene haunts the teenagers and forces them to get out of the museum on the door, in the quiet Bucharest. Gina, now in the body of Andrei, suicides dressed as a girl with a bottle of sleeping drugs. Andrei, in the body of Gina, is locked up by Gina’s grandparents in a sanatorium and he starts writing the adventure. At the end he/she burns him/herself in Gina’s room.

In the preface of the *Dream*, Ovid Crohmălniceanu, the literary critic that discovered Crăciunescu says that

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<sup>26</sup> Mircea CARTARESCU, “Gemenii” [The Twins], in *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, p. 167.

“L’espace souterrain du physique (l’inconscient, présent par son dépôt obscur dans toutes les nouvelles) a pour correspondant l’infrastructure d’un Bucarest secret. [...] Là disparaît toute frontière entre ce qui existe et le monde intérieur personnel ; le point englobe l’infini comme chez Kantor ; et, dans leur incessante dispersion, les galaxies de l’imaginaire courent, grandioses, vers le rouge.”<sup>27</sup>

[The physical underworld (the unconscious, present with its obscure deposit in every short story) is related with the infrastructure of a secret Bucharest. [...] There disappears every frontier between what exists and the personal interior world; the point embodies the infinity, as in Kantor; and, in their unceasing dispersion, the grandiose galaxies of the imaginary are running to the red.]

As the magic-realism of Marquez and Borges, Mircea Cartarescu gives us the lesson of the world that needs no frontier, border or limit for existing. The world that ends and begins in the a communist city separated from the rest of the world by the crazy desires of a fool architect.

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<sup>27</sup> Ovid S. CROHMALNICEANU, « Préfacé » [Preface], in Mircea CARTARESCU, *Le Rêve* [The Dream], translated from Romanian by Hélène Lenz, Paris, Edition Climatis, 1992, p. 7.